

Untitled Memoir Project
Chapter One: A Boy and His VCR
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I have this big idea floating around my head. I think it's the big one. You know the one I'm talking about, the one they say we all have at least one of. Do you really think that's true? If we all had at least one great idea, wouldn't there be more wonderful shit in the world? Or maybe that is the tragedy of life. All these great ideas floating around and we're all too scared or lazy to turn them into things. So maybe that's why the world is so full of recycled stuff and there is nothing new under the sun.

This big idea is really not that big at all. It's just my story. I don't think it's that big of a deal, but whenever I tell my story people tell me I should put it out there. Do they give me any real advice on how to make that happen? Of course not. But I think they are on to something. I've made grown men cry telling my story. I've told it in large rooms to hundreds of people. But when it comes to actually turning it into something, I never seem to be able to get it done.

So here I am, writing about how I would like to write something using my big idea. That is pretty damn silly if you ask me. So instead of dinking around with this thing endlessly like I have for so many years, I'm just going to write it all down. We'll see what happens.

When I was 3 years old I was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy. My mom tells me my dad had a hard time dealing with that news, knowing that his son would be disabled for the rest of his life. Even though it was a mild case and I could walk just fine, it ruined any aspirations he had of me being super athletic. To top that off, I was diagnosed with asthma when I was 6. When I was 8 I started getting really pudgy. Looking back, I wasn't a lazy kid. My mom worked at home, so my brother and I were rarely inside after school. We were either playing outside with the neighborhood kids, swimming in our friends' pool, or playing at the Boys and Girls Club. I just was destined to be a fat kid, I guess. So that was the trifecta: disabled, asthma, and fat. To top it all off, when I was in 5th grade I got glasses. I never even had a chance.

Looking back on things, I didn't really have a normal childhood. I feel like many of my friends grew up in the same house their parents are still living in and they know everyone in their neighborhood as they have all lived there forever. I only got little tastes of that. For some reason my mom and dad could never settle down anywhere for too long. I guess they really were looking for that "dream house." Before my parents had me, they lived in an apartment near the airport in downtown San Diego. It was really cheap because the planes flew right over it. Seeing that this was probably not the best place to start a family, they bought a condo in Encinitas, a sleepy little town about 30 miles up the coast. It was east of the 5 freeway, which at the time

was considered kind of the boonies. But it was the perfect place to raise a family. There were good schools, lots of parks, and lots of space. It was pretty standard suburbia. Our condo was on a culdesac containing several other similar looking condos. The elementary school was just down the street and there was a huge park with a rec center and a pool with diving boards. It was paradise for me.

After my brother was born I guess my parents decided things were a little cramped. They attempted to give us some more space by splitting up their master bedroom into two rooms, making the second room our playroom and an office space for mom. It worked for awhile but it wasn't enough. We didn't really have a yard. My dad built a deck on our patio but there wasn't much space to play. We didn't really care. My brother Carson and I would run around the culdesac. We knew all the kids in the neighborhood and would stay outside most of the time wandering around the neighborhood.

At some point my parents decided to move on up in the world so while they searched for that perfect home they rented a much larger house a couple miles away. For a kid that may as well have been Mars and it was hard at first leaving that little condo. I didn't stay sad for long as our new place was HUGE. My brother and I each had our own room, there was a TV room and an office. We had aviaries in our backyard that my mom put finches in. To top it all off, there were huge canyons and open space behind the backyard. Some older kids built a half pipe back there and there was this old pool we would ride our bikes in. On top of that, my best friend Bernie lived right up the street. It was perfect. So of course we moved again a year later.

My parents were on a quest for their dream house. Their search brought them to Carmel Valley, an incorporated township just east of extremely affluent Del Mar, about 15 miles south of Encinitas. Huge subdivisions were in the development stages and the prices were definitely right. While we waited for this magical dream house we moved into a small 2 bedroom apartment just a little bit farther from my elementary school. I had no idea at the time that it was temporary and that my parents were planning on moving out of Encinitas and into another school district. I actually liked living in an apartment. I thought it was cool. I used to pretend I was a grown up living in the city. I would set up a little shop from my bedroom window and try to sell baseball cards and whatever else I could find to kids walking by. I only made about a quarter but I had a blast doing it.

Tragedy struck. At least, for my parents it did. There was some massive sewage problems in the new sub division they were planning on moving in to that year and construction got delayed indefinitely. My mom wanted a house and she really wanted out of the apartment so my parents took another opportunity that was available. They bought a condo in a brand new community in La Costa called Sea Point. It was still two bedrooms but the each room was almost the size of our current apartment. There was also an amazing ocean view as we were on the second story of a duplex. It was sort of a tennis club type place for older people but that meant they had brand new tennis courts and huge swimming pools for us to play in. It was right by the bus stop. Again, I had no idea that this bus would not be taking us to good old Park Dale Lane but to a

brand new school much closer. That really was the beginning of what I like to call the dark ages of my childhood. The times that didn't really get better until I got to high school.

My parents broke the news to us that we would be changing schools halfway through the school year at Red Robin. It was our favorite restaurant. They buttered up my brother and me with steak fries and Shirley Temples and then dropped the bomb. I excused myself from the table to go to the restroom and then spent the next ten minutes crying in the stall. Dionne Warwick's "That What Friends Are For" was playing in the otherwise empty men's room as I wallowed in the fact that my life as I knew it was over. I had known these kids for my whole life for the most part. I even had gone to preschool with some of them. I was never teased and I had plenty of friends. I spent almost all my time with my two best friends, Bernie and Aaron, but I was about as popular as you could be in second grade. Everyone came to my birthday parties and I came to all of theirs. I know that doesn't sound like much but for some kids the isolation begins even at that young of an age. That certainly wasn't the case for me.

I totally get the fact that my parents were acting in all of our best interests. They wanted us to have our own home, something they had been taught since a young age was the pinnacle of success in America. I just think parents sometimes overestimate the resilience of their kids and sometimes don't completely think through the repercussions that can be caused by decisions like this. I have no resentment whatsoever. In the long run, it was the right decision. It made complete sense. That didn't make it any less painful when on a cold day in January of 1988 I walked into a classroom full of strangers and immediately felt something I had never felt at school before. I felt alone. I felt different. That feeling wouldn't go away for many years.

On my second day of school at La Costa Heights Elementary, I got sent to the Time Out Room. What is the Time Out Room, you ask? It was a dreaded place where "bad kids" got sent to spend their lunch time. It was detention for elementary school kids. During my years at LCH I spent many a lunch there even though I wasn't really a bad kid. I just got caught in some bad circumstances. I know that sounds like every criminal in the book, but I swear it is true. Take my second day of school for example. During recess I noticed there were a couple different playgrounds. There was a "little kid" playground and a "big kid" playground. The big kid playground was off limits to us tiny second graders so we had to play on the little kid playground with its baby slides and fewer swings. It had one awesome thing though: a tunnel.

This tunnel connected two jungle gym type structures and had a clown face on it. You would think the clown face would keep me away, seeing as I was terrified of clowns, but no kid can worth his salt can turn away from a tunnel. I certainly couldn't. I got in that tunnel and I started pretending I was in The Goonies and I was searching for treasure. I was having a blast until a teacher grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me out of the tunnel. It turns out the tunnel was only for kindergardeners. How the hell was I supposed to know that? I guess they forgot to mention that on the tour. This teacher didn't care and handed me a yellow piece of paper I would become very familiar with: The dreaded time out slip. I guess you could say it was downhill from there.

You might be asking yourself why I'm telling you a dumb story about the time I got time out for going in a clown tunnel in second grade. Kids get in trouble all the time. It's part of being a kid. Fine, I'll give you that. I guess it was just the injustice of the whole thing that struck a chord for me. It also established a pattern. Now, I'm not one to play the victim card at every turn but it was hard not to feel like the victim for most of my time at LCH. While in time out for the tunnel offense I made the acquaintance of several bullies in training. They saw an easy target and began harassing me every day during lunch and recess. I used many tactics to try and avoid them. I started off by hanging out with the girls. They didn't mind me being around if I turned the jump rope for them. Since I couldn't actually jump rope, I became all time jump rope turner and was pretty good at it. That worked for awhile but then the jerks got wise. They started teasing me even more. This may have been the first time the words "faggot" were uttered.

From "faggot" begot "fatty," from "fatty" begot "fatass," and it just kept going from there. At some point this was not enough for my tormentors and the physical altercations began. I'm not sure if it was due to lazy teachers and supervisors or what, but more often than not when a teacher or yard duty interrupted a fight and the time out slips came out, I would end up with one in my hand as well. Back to the Time Out Room I went along with the jerks. It was an endless cycle that didn't end until I rode my bike away from those hallowed halls after sixth grade graduation.

In 3rd grade I started Adapted P.E.. I still had to do regular P.E. with my classmates but once or twice a week I got pulled from class and basically did physical therapy type stuff with other disabled kids at school. Everyone in my class knew where I was going and why. Again, it was like painting a target on my back. All the kids picked on me. The first time I ever had the wind knocked out of me was when the skinniest, geekiest kid in our class decided maybe it would be a good idea to punch me as hard as he could in the stomach in front of the whole class. I don't blame the kid. He was just trying to get everyone off his back. Better me than him.

In spite of all the horrible shit I had to put up with at school on a daily basis, I was a pretty happy kid. I had two best friends. Most kids I knew had one best friend. I had two! Sean was in my class. He was a fellow fat kid. He wasn't as fat as me though. Tim was a year older than me. We met in Adapted P.E.. I'm still not sure why he was in there. He was a tall, scrawny kid who could run like lightning. He never got beat up because if any kids started giving him shit, he would just run away and no one could catch him. Lucky bastard. I think they put him in there because he had A.D.D. and frankly was kind of a weird kid. I thought he was the coolest kid in the world though. He loved fantasy books like Lloyd Alexander's Chronicles of Prydain series and he had an Apple II computer with tons of kick ass games. He also lived right down the street from me, so naturally we became inseparable.

In addition to Sean and Tim, I had my brother. He was two years younger than me but he was way cooler than me. He had tons of friends. He didn't completely suck at sports. He was funny. Any sense of humor that I have now, I attribute to my brother. He always kept me laughing even during the lowest points of my life. My mom and dad were really great too. I thought they were

the perfect couple. They met when my dad was in the Navy at the Officer's Club in San Diego. My dad was a great dad. He worked hard but he came home at a decent time every night, helped me with my homework, played in the yard with us, took us to the movies, all that good stuff. No matter how bad my day at school was, I could count on my dad to always listen to me, cheer me up, and show me unconditional love. My mom was great too, don't get me wrong, but there were things going on with her that I will get to later.

In addition to my friends and family, I had tons of interests to keep me occupied. I was a typical geek kid. I was completely obsessed with the things that I was interested in. I was a pro-wrestling fanatic. I could list the names of all the active wrestlers on both the WWF and NWA (later WCW) rosters. I could list match cards for every Wrestlemania. I'm still not sure what got me so obsessed with wrestling. I'll admit it's kind of a silly thing to be into, but that doesn't make any less fun or enjoyable for me. One day my dad got us a new VCR, one of the first front loading models. We were flipping around the channels looking for something to record to test out our brand new magic video machine and there was Hulk Hogan, flexing his 24 inch pythons and telling all the Hulkamaniacs to say their prayers and eat their vitamins. As Mean Gene held that microphone and Hulk flexed those insane guns, I was instantly captivated. To me it was like watching a superhero, but it was real life!

Yes, when I was kid, I thought professional wrestling was completely real. When Andre the Giant grabbed Hulk Hogan's shirt and tore it off his chest, I thought that I was witnessing the ultimate betrayal of a life long friend. I totally bought it. That is, until the day some asshole bully told me it was all fake. He also told me Santa wasn't real. That was a tragic day in my young life. I was heartbroken for about a day and then I got over it. I even began to appreciate wrestling more as I realized it was all a show. Even if it was all a show, it was a really stinking good show!

In addition to pro-wrestling, I also had video games, baseball, movies, books, and later on, music. These things gave me tremendous comfort in times where I otherwise would have none. When I got home from a rough day at school, I could always fire up the Nintendo and escape into a world where I was a world class athlete, a mighty hero, and any other fantasy I could come up with. When my parents wouldn't stop fighting, I could drown them out with Pee-Wee Herman's laugh or the explosions from a Road Runner cartoon. My dad would come up to my room and help me with my math homework (he was an engineer) and afterward he would play basketball with us on the hoop he had put up in our driveway or he would take us to a movie and ice cream. These things were the constants that helped me survive some otherwise tumultuous times.

Thanks to Sean and Tim I managed to get by for 3rd through 5th grade. I did normal kid stuff like little league too. The only problem was that I was terrible. I loved the idea of little league though. In 4th grade I was on the Padres so I got to wear a Padres uniform. I thought it was a blast. Similar to the late 80's real Padres, we lost pretty much every game that season but I loved it. This was the level where the dads pitched to the kids so I would get a hit pretty frequently. That all changed when I moved up to the Minor level the next year. Shit suddenly got real. They let the kids pitch. They let the kids who made fun of me all day at school and beat me up throw a

hard object at me at speeds topping 35 miles per hour. They were no Randy Johnsons, but it still hurt like hell when I got hit by a pitch and I got hit a lot. Like every game. I was a big kid so I took up a lot of the strike zone but I would say at least 75% of those bean balls were intentional. Since we were still elementary school kids, the coaches and officials just wrote it off as kids who really couldn't pitch. The look in the pitcher's eyes always told me differently.

What happens to a kid who gets hit by fastballs a third of the time he steps up to the plate? He becomes terrified of the ball. Duh. I never got a hit during my entire Minor Little League career. In fact I only made contact with the ball twice. It was against the same pitcher in the same game. He was almost as big as me and he threw so slow even I could get some wood on it. Of course I lined it straight to the right fielder both times, but it felt like a small victory just to hit a ball for once. The first time I did it I was so shocked the video looked like Homer Simpson on that softball episode when he hits a home run for the first time. But there was no home run trot for me. I spent two and a half more seasons trying to get better at baseball because I wanted to be good at something and I thought it was my only shot. It was never a thing like most kids have where they are trying to get their dad to notice them or some bullshit like that. My dad noticed me no matter what. I knew that. This was personal. It was the first time I learned that sometimes it is OK to give up, as long as you don't give up completely.

That might not make sense to some of you, but hear me out and I think you'll understand. I really tried to be good at baseball. My dad would take me to the batting cages. We spent hours practicing in the driveway and at the park. I truly made a valiant effort. At a certain point, I just wasn't having fun anymore. I started dreading it. There was even a period where I didn't even want to go to Padres games with my Dad, which was usually my most favorite thing to do in the world. Just thinking about baseball made me want to throw up. Looking back I'm sure my dad knew what was going on and I'm sure he wanted me to pull out of it a lot sooner than I did. I'm glad he let me do it on my own though.

After two seasons of Minors the next level was Majors. This was where things started getting really serious. Most of the kids who played Majors went on to Pony Leagues and playing in high school. I knew I wasn't cut out for that but deep down I still loved the game and I loved wearing that uniform. I still could find peace standing out in deep left field chewing on a giant wad of Big League Chew and pounding my fist into my Jose Canseco glove while I yelled "Hey batter batter batter!" But that can only carry you so far. To play in Majors you actually had to try out. I'm pretty sure my brain blacked out my tryout because it was so terrible and traumatizing. I vaguely remember being called last after my dad convinced them to at least give me a shot. I think I remember some of the bigger kids laughing and saying things as I stepped to the plate. I definitely remember the catcher calling me lardass as I swung and missed at every pitch. The rest is kind of a blur. It was the end of the line.

Or so I thought. My dad made some calls and I was made an offer: If I wanted to play little league that season I could play on my brother's minor league team. I took it. So there I was, a third year minor leaguer playing on a team with his brother and a bunch of other kids who were

two years younger than me. As you would expect, it was pretty damn embarrassing. Even though I was playing with younger kids, I still couldn't hit the ball. I still got beamed a lot. I did get pretty good at drawing walks. I'm fairly certain I set a league record for walks during a three year period. I definitely made some kind of record for most runs scored while having a .000 career batting average. That's kind of like being Andy Hawkins, who in 1990 became one of the few pitchers to throw a no hitter and lose. It's certainly not something they give you a trophy for.

I was starting to get really depressed. I was starting to have a lot of problems at school and now little league, which used to be one of my biggest escapes from all that, made me even more miserable. I started thinking it was time to hang up my spikes. One day my dad was driving us home from practice and I was in a particularly bad mood. He put his arm around me and told me something that would change my life: "You know, it's OK if you don't want to do this anymore." I was shocked. Then came the kicker: "As long as you do something productive instead, I don't care what you do. I just want you to be happy." I don't know many dads who would do that. Many of my friends' dads practically dragged them onto the field. So we started discussing what else I could do as an extracurricular activity to replace little league. My dad had some tapes of the Cal Bears marching band he listened to sometimes and I really loved those. I had always loved music and had always wanted to try another instrument after quitting piano lessons when I was six. So that's how I put down the Jose Canseco glove and picked up an alto saxophone.

Looking back at everything, I think things in my life would have gotten much worse much more quickly if I hadn't joined band in sixth grade. It was really my first creative outlet, something that I now know is one of my keys to enjoying life to the fullest. While I wouldn't really call them friends, it did give me a group of peers that I wasn't terrified of and I could actually interact with as real people. This became essential later on in Junior High as I can soundly state that if it hadn't been for band I wouldn't have even made it past seventh grade, let alone eighth. Encouraging me to quit little league and join band was really one of the greatest gifts my dad ever gave me. I finally found something that I was good at and it made me feel good. It made me feel that maybe I wasn't a total piece of shit and maybe my life did have value.

Since I had experience reading music from my early piano lessons and from playing the recorder in music class (yeah, there's a reason why they make you play those things in elementary school, who knew?) I was a very fast learner on the sax. I quickly joined my fellow sixth graders in Advanced Band and got to perform on stage in front of parents and students at various events. My real highlight was performing as part of a presentation in front of my sixth grade class spotlighting something about us that our classmates weren't aware of. I played a solo I had been working on for months on my own and seeing the shocked faces of all my classmates who for the most part had written me off and given me shit for the last 4 years was one of the best feelings I ever had. I captured that moment in my mind and played it back for years to come whenever I was really depressed as a way to cheer myself up. For those 5 minutes everyone forgot I was the weird fat kid and they saw a glimpse of the real me. It was my first real win. For kids like me whose wins were few and far between, we savored those wins. It was wonderful.

So there I was, a fat kid with glasses who had problems keeping his left arm at his side due to a handicap most people didn't know he had as I started sixth grade. Sixth grade is supposed to be the highlight of your elementary school years. You finally rule the school. I remember when I was in Kindergarten and first grade being completely terrified and in awe of the sixth graders. They were huge. When we lived in our first house there were a couple of sixth graders who lived across the street and they terrorized us. They would jump out of the bushes and throw water balloons at us and crap like that. One time I accidentally left my sticker book containing all my best Garbage Pail Kids cards in it and they set it on fire. When I went outside in the morning all that was left was a pile of ashes. It was heartbreaking. Even the sixth grade girls were scary. A couple of them once ambushed my brother when he was out riding around the culdesac on his Big Bird Big Wheel. We always kept a can of He-Man slime from the super awesome Slime Pit in the back basket for emergency use only. My brother came home dripping in it after the girls slimed him. We always went out at least in pairs after that. So after all that, I should have been excited to be a sixth grade. I was now the one doing the terrifying. I quickly found out that would not be the case.

For some reason our school had the bright idea to mix up all the classes my sixth grade year. For almost the whole time I was there they had a "gifted" track that they put all the GATE students in. GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) was a program you had to test into. So I was in a class with smarter kids. Not to say some of those smart kids weren't giant dicks, but it probably could have been worse for me earlier if I'd been in one of the other classes with some of the more oafish types. The bullies in the GATE track were of a more refined stock. Most of the time they were somewhat civil about their bullying. The bullies in the other classes were animals. Thankfully since we were on different tracks, I didn't have to mingle with them too much. I actually had my mom to thank for that.

Back in second grade, shortly after I started at La Costa Heights, my mom got a call from my teacher. She was concerned that I might be having trouble in class. She kept finding me sitting under my desk. She would grab me and yell at me and sometimes even give me a dreaded Time Out Slip. She was thinking about having me put in Special Ed. Holy shit, could you imagine how much worse things would have been for me if on top of everything I had to ride the short bus to school? No offense to any readers who traveled on the short bus. I'm sure you would even admit that it would spell certain doom for a kid like me. My mom immediately thought something was up. She insisted that I didn't belong in Special Ed, that I was a smart kid and that I was an avid reader. My teacher protested, saying I never volunteered to read in class and she never saw me reading. My mom refused to believe this. She knew for a fact that the floors of my room were covered in books and most nights she had to come in and force me to go to bed instead of read all night. Something didn't add up. One day my teacher decided to actually observe what I did when I was sitting underneath my desk. To her surprise (and my mom's vindication), I was reading books. Not just any books, they were much higher reading level books I had either checked out from the library or brought from home.

Thanks to this revelation my mom took me to get an IQ test and I took the GATE entrance test. I scored very high on both. I am not trying to be modest about my IQ score, I honestly don't remember what it was and my mom doesn't either but I do remember the lady who did the test saying it was super high. So let's just say I was a 7 year old super genius. Sounds good to me. It still didn't change the fact I spent most of my time dreaming I was someone or somewhere else. It did mean that I got placed into the GATE track the next school year and things were ever slightly better for me at school. That stopped when they decided to end the GATE track and offer after school GATE classes instead for my sixth grade year. What appears to have happened is there was some kind of school draft for classes. Imagine the NFL draft but with elementary school kids. Looking back it's pretty obvious that certain teachers managed to hand pick their classes and other teachers who were brand new or didn't give a shit got stuck with whatever was left.

About 2/3 of the kids I had been in class with for 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades ended up together in what would be the class containing all the smart and good kids. I was not in this class. I got put in what turned out to be the "average" class. It consisted of kids like me who were not chosen to continue on in the super good kids class but definitely too good and smart to put in the class with the rougher kids. They combined us with some kids who were only petty criminals, not quite the hoodlums in the aforementioned rougher kids class. They were still a step above the bullies I was used to and they really scared the shit out of me. In the coming year they would also beat that shit out of me. So I had that going for me, which was nice. Sean didn't have that going for him. He ended up in the rough kid class. It almost destroyed him. It almost destroyed me. I can say now that I guess I'm glad 6th grade happened because it was a training hell for the real hell that was to come in junior high. That's the only good thing I have to say about sixth grade though.